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# How Can We Respond to Those Who Hate Religion? (Leader's Guide and Participant's Guide)

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*Dordt College*

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Leader's and Participant's Guide to

# How can we respond to those who hate religion?

A Study of Antitheism's Major Critiques of Religion

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Autumn 2017

## How to Use This Material

This study of antitheism is composed of five modules. Each module contains a summary of the material addressed (usually a few articles or YouTube clips about antitheists arguments and critiques of those arguments), definitions of potentially unfamiliar terms, critiques of the antitheist assertion presented in the material, and discussion questions.

This study is intended for **informal, small group** discussion, such as that of a Bible study or small group. The themes presented in each submodule may be unpacked on its own, but it is the hope of the authors that the entire study may be useful to the interested reader (leader and participant alike). The study is also aimed toward **high school students, college students, and post-college adults** with an interest in how science and the Christian faith interact.

As you read, it is our hope that you will come across (and come up with) questions which challenge you, both in understanding your personal faith and in understanding science. In this study, you will have the opportunity to grow through asking and answering these questions: Why has the church historically believed in *this* answer or *that* answer? How might you be challenged to defend your answer?

## Planning and Preparing for a Session

The material assumes that each session will last for about 45-60 minutes. It also assumes that each participant will have read the assigned article(s) and considered the Discussion Questions ahead of time.

Each submodule may be unpacked on its own, but the particular submodules will make more sense in the context of the whole set of modules. This is because some submodules contain articles which address articles referenced in previous submodules. It must also be noted that the provided discussion questions are intended as a guide for your discussion, but you should by no means restrict your discussion to these questions. Try to keep your group's discussion relevant to the general themes addressed in the module, but be flexible.

## Equipped for Service

This “Leader’s Guide” is meant to **equip leaders** of these small group discussions, and thus the following pages are far more detailed and expansive than the average participant may judge necessary for complex discussion. We offer information from other references as well as key terms, brief summaries of each article, and an explanation of perceived strengths and weaknesses in the texts. This has been done in the hope that you, as the leader, may more easily facilitate and moderate discussion amongst your peers in the small group. Your small group may be made up of the generation that initiates change in how the common Christian comes to understand these questions and answer – in the service of your peers, do not underestimate your own significance as a leader or co-leader.

## Introduction to the Antitheism Modules

Some people strongly believe that religion is outmoded, ridiculous, indefensible, and detrimental to human society. This type of distaste for religion is termed “antitheism” (or the “New Atheism,” though we won’t use that term often here). Though antitheism typically requires atheism (which is defined as the *absence* of belief in deities), it tends to be more “militant” than atheism. Antitheists, such as Richard Dawkins and Carl Sagan, aim to convince people that the world would be better if we abandoned religion in favour of a materialistic rationality.

Antitheists often base their cosmology on rationality, frequently in the form of science. They believe that science supplies more accurate, truthful descriptions of reality than religion. Because antitheists cite science to support their arguments, it may seem that science and antitheism are necessarily linked. It may seem that science actually does support an antitheist worldview, and that science threatens theist worldviews. It may seem that the antitheists are so much louder and more confident than the theists who critique them that the antitheists must be more right.

We believe that this is not the case.

There are many intelligent philosophers, scientists, and historians who challenge antitheist thought using the techniques of their field. Contrary to the claims of antitheism, rationality (and science) and religion are not inherently incompatible. In this study guide, we hope to introduce you to the basic tenants of antitheism and critiques of those tenants. We hope to help you become more comfortable understanding where antitheists are coming from, and engaging in constructive dialogues about the challenges antitheists level at religion. We hope to show you that the discussion about religion is not as simplistic as people like Dawkins may make it out to be when they present their position to the general public.

The first module uses a lecture about the New Atheism by Alister McGrath as a starting point for this discussion about the relationship between science and faith. McGrath is admirably gracious in his presentation, and he is “on the side of faith,” so to speak. Reading or listening to antitheists can be fatiguing, so we hope that beginning this study guide with a thoughtful lecture given by a Christian will ease participants into the discussion. Each of the following modules is centered on an assumption of antitheism. In these module, we will describe the evidence antitheists supply to support that assumption, and then we will present critiques of that assumption and invite you to make some critiques of your own. The titles of the modules are fairly inflammatory, but we thought that these titles accurately reflected the content that will be addressed in this study guide, which is equally—if not more—provocative.

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# Bibliography

## Module 1

Alistair McGrath – The New Atheism and the Dialogue between Science and Faith with Slides. (2016, August 11). Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rb86hxb\\_Yc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rb86hxb_Yc)

## Module 2

### Antitheist resources

Harris, S. (2006, January 2). *Science Must Destroy Religion*. Retrieved from [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/sam-harris/science-must-destroy-reli\\_b\\_13153.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/sam-harris/science-must-destroy-reli_b_13153.html)

Hitchens, C. *Christopher Hitchens on Science vs Religion*. Retrieved from [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hv6U2BtdFGc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hv6U2BtdFGc)

### Critique resources

Davis, T., & Snobelen, S. (2017, March 8). Francis Collins and the New Atheists. *BioLogos*. Retrieved from <https://biologos.org/blogs/ted-davis-reading-the-book-of-nature/francis-collins-and-the-new-atheists>

Snobelen, S. (2017, May 10). Does Science Equal Atheism? *BioLogos*. Retrieved from <https://biologos.org/blogs/ted-davis-reading-the-book-of-nature/does-science-equal-atheism>

## Module 3

### Antitheist resources

The problem with religion. (2012, September 10). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBV3eqvQPJs>

The root of all evil – The God Delusion (full length). (2011, September 22). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8nAos1M-Ts1>

Richard Dawkins on why Religious Faith has been a Major Motivator for War Throughout History. (2013, November 30). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfYrNz3zhno>

### Critique resources

Armstrong, K. (2014, September 25). [The myth of religious violence](#). *The Guardian*.

Cavanaugh, W. T. (2007, Spring/Summer). [Does religion cause violence? Behind the common question lies a morass of unclear thinking](#). *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*.

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<sup>1</sup> You may watch the full video if you would like, but the first 2:30 minutes provide a solid introduction, and the first 10 minutes or so are probably sufficient to begin with.



## Module 4

### Antitheist resources

Elmhirst, S. (2015, June 9). "Is Richard Dawkins Destroying His Reputation?" *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2015/jun/09/is-richard-dawkins-destroying-his-reputation>

### Critique resources

Davis, T., & Snobelen, S. (2017, June 15). Scientism and the New Atheists. *BioLogos*. Retrieved from <https://biologos.org/blogs/ted-davis-reading-the-book-of-nature/scientism-and-the-new-atheists>

### Other resources you may find to be helpful

Holt, J. (2016, October 22). Beyond Belief, a book review of Richard Dawkins *The God Delusion*. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/22/books/review/Holt.t.html>

McGrath, A., & McGrath, J. (2007). *The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine*. Downers Grove: IVP Books.

## Module 0: Before You Begin

### Overview Questions

*Soon, you and your small group will discuss topics related to the atheistic critiques of religion. These pre-questions are designed to help you think about these topics and to provide you with a record of how your thoughts have developed throughout the session. These questions might not be discussed, but please answer them thoughtfully and honestly nonetheless.*

Have you interacted with atheists before (either in-person or through media, such as books or articles)? How comfortable are you defending or explaining your faith to people who do not believe in God?

Why do you believe what you believe?

What are some reasons that might prompt a person to become an atheist? How should Christians interact with atheists?

What is religion? Is atheism a religion?

What is reason? Is reason universal across cultures? Or does the way that people rationalize things vary from culture to culture?

Are religion and reason incompatible?

Respond to this quote from Richard Dawkins from a *TIME* interview: “[The idea of a supernatural intelligent designer] does seem to me to be a worthy idea. Refutable—but nevertheless grand and big enough to be worthy of respect. I don't see the Olympian gods or Jesus coming down and dying on the Cross as worthy of that grandeur. They strike me as parochial. If there is a God, it's going to be a whole lot bigger and a whole lot more incomprehensible than anything that any theologian of any religion has ever proposed.”

## Module 1: Introduction to Christian Responses to Antitheism

Reference Materials: “The New Atheism and the Dialogue Between Science and Faith”  
(Alister McGrath)

### The Gist

The New Atheism relies on simplistic, narrow, and insufficiently validated assumptions about reality and history, and though it raises “very interesting” and worthwhile questions about the relationship between science and faith, it is ultimately an unsustainable and fundamentally misguided worldview. (Please do watch the whole clip. It is long, but it is easy to follow and, as Dr. McGrath would say, “very interesting.”)

### Terms

*Scientism*: the view that science can provide the best answers to any question worth asking. Science is the only valid means of knowing, and the answers it provides are more truthful than any answer that has been obtained by non-scientific methods.

### A Disclaimer

When critiquing someone’s ideas, it is important that you honestly try to understand what their position is and why they might think that way. That’s why we started with a module based on a lecture by Alister McGrath; he provides an excellent example of how to critique ideas charitably. We hope that you are inspired to be thoughtful and measured in your discussions about antitheism (or anything else, really). Respect people; challenge ideas.

That said, we do not supply an extensive list of works by antitheists in these modules. The primary reason for that is that, because antitheists are so adamantly against religion, and because people tend to value their religious beliefs very highly, reading a whole book by someone like Richard Dawkins or listening to a whole lecture by someone like Christopher Hitchens can be deeply painful and depressing for a believer who is new to the conversation about antitheism. These modules are intended to familiarize you with the basic tenants of antitheism and expose you to some antitheists so that you are better able to engage in discussions about antitheism should you ever choose to read *The God Delusion* or something along those lines. It’s not that we want to protect you from difficult conversations; we believe that thinking about difficult questions is important—that’s why we made all these study guides about science and faith. But, we do think that it is perfectly respectable to start small. So that’s

what we did. If you feel ready to dive into a book or full-length documentary about antitheism, go for it. Your contributions to the group discussion will be that much richer.

### Discussion Questions

Have you heard of Alister McGrath before? Have you read any of his books?

Describe the tone of the lecture. How does McGrath treat the antitheists he critiques?

Which of his points did you find most interesting? Which were most helpful?

Why do you think that antitheism is (or was) so popular?

Is it the responsibility of the media to present the public with accurate accounts of the interaction between science and religion (or between faith and rationality)? If not the media, who bears this responsibility? (Or is it some of both?)

How do you think that McGrath views the relationship between science and faith?

Do you think that McGrath is right to treat atheism (specifically, the New Atheism) the way that he does? Is he too hospitable toward it? (Or not hospitable enough?)

If you could ask McGrath a question about his lecture, what would you ask?

What would you like to learn about the New Atheism or how it views faith?

## Module 2: Religion Has Always Been at War with Rationality and Science

Reference Materials: “Christopher Hitchens on Science vs Religion” (Hitchens); “Science Must Destroy Religion” (Harris); “Francis Collins and the New Atheists” (Davis & Snobelen); “Does Science Equal Atheism?” (Snobelen)

### The Gist

Many antitheists believe that religion is fundamentally at odds with rationality and intelligent thought. That is, basically, their motivation for being *anti*-theist. Historic interactions between the Church and scientists are cited as proof that the Church has a long tradition of seeking to stamp out intellectual progress in science, and that science has always ultimately been the victor. Galileo’s conflict with the Catholic Church about the heliocentricity of the universe is probably the most frequently cited example, though the Scopes Trial and other more modern examples are also used. The idea is that it was the Church and religious people who resisted scientific truth and advancement, and once they can no longer pretend that the science is not true, they retroactively try to use science as proof for God. Not everyone who believes that science and religion are at war is necessarily an antitheist—plenty of Christians, agnostics, and atheists believe this to be true as well. Acceptance of the idea that science and religion are in conflict can be seen in the way groups such as Answers in Genesis approach certain forms of “secular” science and the way that nineteenth century natural theologians fit the theory of evolution into their theological framework. However, antitheists believe that this perceived conflict is proof that science should (and can) replace religion.

Dawkins defines faith as “non-thinking,” and claims that faith is responsible for turning “otherwise sane, rational people” into murderous zealots. Because religion depends on the rejection of independent, rational thought, religion is necessarily at odds with rationality. A person cannot both be wholly rational and religious. Religion is narrow-minded, and faith can be a “lethal weapon.” Rationality is a safer, more civilized standard for living than rationality.

### Terms

*Antitheism*: the belief that religion is detrimental to humankind.

*Conflict narrative*: the assumption that science and religion are necessarily in conflict and that it has always been that way throughout history.

*Faith*: “being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see,” trust in something that is not necessarily proved.

*Natural theology*: the belief that theology can be derived from the study of the natural world.

*Science*: a systematic study that uses testable hypothesis to accumulate and produce predictions about the universe.

## Critiques

**“Science” as a distinct, discrete field is a relatively new concept.** Science as an endeavour that used empiricism and induction to predict and determine the mechanisms of natural phenomena arose in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Previously, science was very teleology-oriented, and Aristotelian science blended with Christian theology to form a medieval cosmology. In this era, science and religion were not distinct entities; study of the natural world was often subordinate to theological ideas. The term “science” came into use in the nineteenth century, and around this time science became a field increasingly distinct from theology and philosophy. “Science” has not been a discrete field of study for very long, and to claim that there is a long history of the Church suppressing science is simply inaccurate. The Church was not opposed to secular science because “secular” science was not really a thing.<sup>2</sup>

**Many historic scientists believed that their study of nature and their religion were necessarily linked, and that they were mutually complementary.** Notably, Galileo did not perceive any conflict between his Catholic faith and his science. Galileo believed that Creation and Scripture are both books of revelation authored by God, so they could not be in conflict. In his mind, the Copernican theory did not degrade the veracity of the Bible because the Bible was not written to outline scientific principles, it was written to reveal truths about salvation. For many years, natural theology—a field that seeks to derive or substantiate Christian theology through the study of nature—was the favoured approach to science in universities such as Cambridge and Oxford. Christians believed that the study of nature could tell us some truths, the study of Scripture could tell us some other truths, and a Christian must heed both.

On a different but related note: religious figures who objected to certain new scientific concepts did not always simply do so on religious grounds. For example, Bishop Samuel Wilberforce objected to the theory of evolution primarily on scientific grounds. He did make a few religious objections as well, but he seemed to think that the primary issue with the theory of evolution was weak science.

**The “conflict” narrative seems to have only gained popularity in the late nineteenth century, but it has been retroactively applied to historic interactions between science and religion.** The current conflict model held by many religious and nonreligious alike seems to be primarily the work of two late-nineteenth century historians, J. W. Draper and A. D. White. In his book *History of the conflict between religion and science*, Draper suggested that the history of science and religion can be understood as a conflict between two powers: the human intellect and religious tradition. As humankind becomes more rational and science improves, there is increasingly less room for antiquated, irrational religion. White took a similar view, though he described the

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<sup>2</sup> For more on this, and other narratives about science and religion, you may want to read the book *Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths about Science and Religion*, edited by Ronald L Numbers (2009).

conflict as one between dogmatic theology and science rather than religion generally and science.

These men used significant interactions between new scientific developments and certain branches of Christianity (and sometimes other religions as well) as proof that religion and science had a long history of contention. For example, White claims that Genesis was “universally” believed to be a literal account of creation during the sixteenth century, and that science was forced to conform to this interpretation. This set the stage for the “violent attacks” on Galileo by the Church. In these scenarios, religion lashes out against science as it is perennially being forced to concede ground to the advancement of science. These accounts assume that the “fundamentalist religion versus modern science” paradigm seen in the nineteenth century was the paradigm in which all previous science-religion interactions took place.

Draper and White were influenced by their historical context, and they apparently neglected to account for the different historical contexts of previous discourses between students of nature and the Church. It is true that throughout history religious people have disagreed with or refused to support certain scientific advancements, but summarizing it as a constant warfare between science and religion is simplistic and inaccurate.

**Religion does not necessarily inhibit rational, creative thought.** Sure, you could use religion as an excuse not to think. But there is not evidence that this is actually the most common approach. Plenty of scientists—both historically and currently—cite their religious convictions as their primary motivation for pursuing disciplines such as science or creative writing or mathematics or theatre. There is no evidence to suggest that religious people are necessarily less creative or less rational than people who profess to be unreligious. Just because one believes that empirically proving the existence of God is unreasonable, one is not therefore unable to study aspects of the physical world empirically or employ rational, creative thought in other ways.

Faith is not an empirical thing. But that is not demonstrably bad. Science is based on faith, in its own way. It is based on faith that the scientific method will yield reliable, accurate descriptions of the physical world. Science functions with a great degree of uncertainty—science doesn’t *prove* things, it suggests descriptions of the way things probably are. Of course, often these descriptions are likely highly accurate and very useful, but they are not proved beyond a doubt. Science and religion require different kinds of uncertainty—one acknowledges the potential limitations of our current empirical tools while the other acknowledges that empirical tools are not particularly constructive when dealing with the nonphysical—but uncertainty does not negate the usefulness of these fields. Faith isn’t necessarily non-thinking; it can be simply an acknowledgement of our limitations and willingness to assume the truthfulness of something without possessing comprehensive physical proof that it is the case.



## Discussion Questions

What do you believe to be the proper relationship between science and faith?

Are there instances in which you think that science and religion are mutually incompatible?

Why might the conflict narrative as described by Draper and White have flourished in the past few centuries? Is there any truth to their narratives?

When is it okay to have faith? Is faith ever dangerous?

If you could have a conversation with Hitchens or Harris about the relationship between science and faith, what points would you want to make? What questions would you want to ask?

## Module 3: Religion Makes People Violent (Or, at least, it can)

Reference Materials: “The Problem with Religion” (Dawkins), “The Root of All Evil – The God Delusion” (Dawkins), “Richard Dawkins on Why Religious Faith has been a Major Motivator for War Throughout History” (Dawkins), “The Myth of Religious Violence” (Armstrong), “Does Religion Cause Violence?” (Cavanaugh)

### The Gist

Because religions dictate who belongs and who doesn’t (based on religious adherence) and because religions teach that disbelief is bad, religions make their adherents view people who do not share certain religious beliefs as the enemy, reason antitheists. Religions necessarily mark parts of the world as good and parts as bad, and these inflexible definitions encourage people to be less hospitable and more violent. Some religions even require their adherents to punish or destroy those who fail to adhere to the religion. Psychological studies show that participating in rituals makes people more inclined to discriminate against those who belong to their “out-group” (that is, people who are not members of the ritual-practicing group). Based on these tendencies, antitheists assert that rejecting religion is actually advisable from a public safety point of view.

### Terms

*In-group*: the group of individuals that one feels one belongs to. So, your social circle is your in-group, your class is your in-group, people who share your fashion sense are part of your in-group. An in-group can be any group of people that share some defining characteristic.

*Out-group*: the group of individuals who are not part of your in-group. People who dress differently, come from a different region of the country, or work in a different field from you can be part of your out-group.

*Ritual*: a set of actions that usually bear some religious significance.

### Critiques

**Religion is an ill-defined term, and antitheism can be categorized as a “religion.”** To understand Dawkins’s accusations about religion, we require a working definition of what “religion” is. It is surprisingly difficult to define religion. Consequently, many books of psychology or philosophy begin with the author’s definition of religion as it applies to the content of the book, and these definitions vary from person to person and from field to field.

A very general—and therefore widely applicable—definition of religion is “a system of beliefs.” By this criterion, antitheism is definitely a religion. If this is the case, the claim that religion makes people violent is basically claiming that people who have organized systems of belief are necessarily more inclined toward violence than those who lack such a unifying system. This is

probably not what Dawkins has in mind when he says that religion makes people violent—not least because most everyone has a system of (at least somewhat organized) beliefs. Dawkins likely interprets religion to be a system of beliefs that center on a commitment to at least one divine or abstract agent. He often targets Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and these religions can be encompassed by such a definition.

However, abstract motivating agents are not necessarily gods. “Secular” systems, such as an economy or a nation, are also dependent on a belief in abstract motivating agents (e.g. money and the concept of human rights). Sure, money can be a physical thing and rights are certainly legitimate (please don’t think I am dismissing the reality of human rights), but they are meaningful without being necessarily tangible. This might seem like a bit of a stretch if you’re not used to thinking about systems in psychological or anthropological terms. But, many anthropologists and academics who study religion are inclined to believe that defining religion as a discrete body of beliefs that center on a commitment to a god misrepresents how systems of belief actually work.<sup>3</sup> Religion is not confined to a church or a mosque or a synagogue—it can extend to all aspects of human life, and it is present in even those who deny the existence of gods or God.

**Correlation is not causation, and religions do not seem to be uniquely correlated with violence.**

There is evidence that rituals make people more inclined to favour those who share in the ritual over those who have not, but rituals are not by any means restricted to religion. Athletic teams can have rituals, social clubs can have rituals, academic fields can have rituals. Rituals are one important way that humans identify who is like them and who is not, and this in-group versus out-group reasoning does influence the way that we treat others. It would probably be more accurate to simply assert that humans generally tend to dislike those who are not like us. There is overwhelming evidence that this tendency is present in humans from infancy. This tendency to be more willing to harm those who belong to our out-group is not evidently introduced by religious adherence; religious identity is just one way we parse who is in our out-group.

**Theist religions do not have a greater history of violence than atheists or “secular” groups of people.** Violence can be motivated by many things—greed, fear, hate—and these sentiments seem to be universal regardless of religious affiliation. In addition, case studies from history indicate that “secular” or atheist groups are just as capable of great violence as any theist religious group. For example, the Soviet Union was an atheist state, and it was responsible for the murder of at least 3 million people (including deaths in the Gulags, executions, and deaths that resulted from forced resettlements). Estimates of the total number of deaths brought about by Stalin’s regime range from 8 million to 61 million.

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<sup>3</sup> If you’re interested to learn more about this idea, T. Fitzgerald’s 2000 book *The ideology of religious studies* may be a good place to start.

Because the distinction between “religious” and “secular” is fairly arbitrary, and because any group association makes people more inclined to desire the success of that in-group it is inaccurate to assert that religious people are more violent than people with allegiance to secular institutions. Abolishing religion in favour of antitheistic rationality would not reduce violence in the world; violence against the other is (unfortunately) a natural human tendency.

## Discussion Questions

Do you agree with Dawkins’s definition of faith? Do you think that faith is a virtuous thing? Why or why not?

Why might antitheists believe that religion is uniquely linked to violent behaviour?

Is it true that the only reason young men become human bombs is that they were indoctrinated with religion as children? How do you think that Dawkins would respond to people who become suicide bombers after converting to Islam (or whatever religion they adhere to) as adults? How do you think that Dawkins would respond to people who simply convert (rather than convert and then commit homicide) from agnosticism or atheism to a religion as adults?

Is the fact that a religion can lead to violent behaviour sufficient reason to abandon the religion? What about other group identities that can lead to violent behaviour against those who do not share that identity (e.g. citizenship, membership in a political party, “membership” in an ethnic group)?

Who do you think Dawkins is referring to when he says that “science, we are told, should not tread on the toes of religion” in the “Root of all evil” video? Who says that science should defer to religion?

What assumptions about religion and the relationship between religious faith and rational intellectual pursuits (e.g. science) does Dawkins make when he suggests that faith is believing something in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary? (Again, this comes from the “Root of all evil” video.)

## Module 4: Rationality is the only reliable means of knowing

Reference Materials: “Is Richard Dawkins Destroying His Reputation?” (Elmhirst),  
“Scientism and the New Atheists” (Davis & Snobellen)

### The Gist

Some religions teach that there is only one god; some teach that there are hundreds. Some religions teach that it is wrong to eat pigs; others teach that it is wrong to eat any animal at all. Some religions teach that humans can work their way to eternal life; some teach that humans can think their way there. On the other hand, all rational humans will agree that Newton’s laws are generally accurate and that two plus two is four. Clearly, religions provide disparate pictures of reality, but rationality provides one, reliable, useful picture of reality. Religion is uncertain and un-provable, but rationality is universal and therefore much more helpful means of knowing.

### Terms

*Know*: to be aware of something, to have information about.

*Rationality*: being based in logic and reason.

*Reliable*: trustworthy, dependable, sound, consistently true.

\*For the record, we have faith that you are familiar with these particular terms. But, it is helpful to define your terms before engaging in a discussion or debate. That way, when you make a statement or argument, others have a clearer idea of what you are trying to say.

### Critiques

**Rationality as exercised through science is not infallible.** Scientists get it wrong sometimes. Throughout history, people have drawn conclusions about the nature of the world, and, through further study and discussions with others, those models were abandoned. For example, it was once thought that rodents and flies could be spontaneously generated if someone left rubbish in a box for a while. Flies and mice did seem to arise out of food scraps and soiled cloth, and spontaneous generation seemed to be a good description of this phenomena. Upon further investigation, it turned out that this was not the case. The people who suggested spontaneous generation were drawing rational conclusions based on the available information, but today the conclusions they drew seem to be fairly ridiculous.

Sometimes, unscrupulous scientists intentionally draw inaccurate or unwarranted conclusions about data in order to gain financial support or recognition.<sup>4</sup>

Also, doing science often requires a good deal of money and equipment. As a result, people who have money can pay for scientists to do research in a lucrative field, and this field may become disproportionately represented. Consequently, there is a danger that *reality* is inaccurately represented. There may be an underfunded bit of research that helpfully puts larger research studies into context, but few people know about it. This should not cause us to distrust science generally; science is a helpful tool, and it has shed light on some invaluable truths. But, it should remind us that science as we know it today probably does not give us a wholistic truth and that science is not infallible. Science should be done with humility—as is the case in any field of study—and painting science or rationality as the only reliable way of knowing can cause people to lose sight of the fact that rationality is exercised by people in a historical and social context.

**Logical reasoning does not universally lead to the same conclusions.** Humans do seem to be naturally reasonable creatures, but cultural norms and environmental factors influence the way we exercise reason. What may seem reasonable to one person may seem equally unreasonable to another. If cultural assumptions and environmental factors are accounted for when exercising reason, the conclusions people reach may indeed be fairly similar. (In other words, if we define our terms really well and everyone *agrees* on those definitions, we are more likely to reach similar conclusions with our logic. For example, if all agree upon the attributes, character, and behaviour of deity X, we are in a better place to discuss the plausibility of Deity X's existence.) But, those assumptions can make a world of difference. Dawkins believes that his antitheism beliefs are wholly logical, but other people whose arguments are also apparently guided by reason disagree with Dawkins. It is difficult to identify your own assumptions, which may be part of Dawkins's problem. As one *Guardian* article put it, "For Dawkins, the idea that someone could understand his argument and still disagree with him was bewildering."

**Faith is not the opposite of reason.** Here, I'll defer to Dr. Francis Collins, who summarizes this point nicely: "Faith is not the opposite of reason. Faith rests squarely upon reason, but with the added component of revelation. So such discussions between scientists and believers happen quite readily. But neither scientists nor believers always embody the principles precisely. Scientists can have their judgment clouded by their professional aspirations. And the pure truth of faith, which you can think of as this clear spiritual water, is poured into rusty vessels called human beings, and so sometimes the benevolent principles of faith can get distorted as positions are hardened."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For one example of this, see Kearns, C. et al. (2016, September 12). Sugar industry and coronary heart disease research: a historical analysis of internal industry documents. *JAMA Internal Medicine*.

<sup>5</sup> Dawkins, R., & Collins, F. (2006, November 5) God vs. Science: We revere faith and scientific progress, hunger for miracles and for MRIs. But are the worldviews compatible? (D. Van Biema, Interviewer for *TIME*)

**Empiricism can be helpful, but humans are not apparently primarily (or solely) rational beings.**

We use reason to make certain life choices, and reason is often very helpful when navigating certain situations and conceptualizing reality. But, humans are also deeply social and emotional beings. If a person were to consistently employ reason without also taking social and emotional factors into account, we probably would not consider the person to be especially humane. Even antitheists appeal to emotions when making their cases. The YouTube videos referenced in Module 2 that feature Dawkins describing the dangers of religion are designed to evoke emotion. The images of people engaging in religious practice are extreme; many Christian church services regularly transpire without small children erupting into religiously impassioned tears. The long-revered intellectuals of the Greek tradition employed three tactics in their rhetoric: pathos, logos, ethos. These three ways of approaching a subject do seem to helpfully describe the way people think about things. Yes, logic is important. But logic takes place in the context of emotions and relationships, and trying to excise rationality from a human context is probably somewhat foolhardy.

**Discussion Questions**

Is science trustworthy? Is rationality trustworthy? Is religion trustworthy? Is faith trustworthy?

Why might people such as Dawkins want to make rationality the guiding force of human societies?

What “ways of knowing” do you use in your daily life? Include some examples. (You may use “ethos, logos, pathos” as you describe the “ways of knowing” you employ, but feel free to elaborate on these three ideas or to come up with alternative ways of parsing “ways of knowing.”)

Are there other arguments that you have heard antitheists employ that have not been addressed by this study guide? How would you (or have you) responded to those arguments?

What are your thoughts on people like Dawkins and Hitchens? If you could have a conversation about any subject with either of these men, what would you want to talk about?

What do you have faith in? Why do you have faith?

What role do you think rationality should play in society? What role does it currently play?

Revisit the Module 0 questions. Would you answer any of those questions differently now than you did initially?

What have you found to be helpful about this study guide and your discussions? What could have been done differently?